

WHAT CAUSES SPECIAL EDUCATORS TO BECOME BURNED OUT?

A Research Project Report

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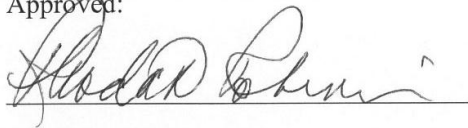
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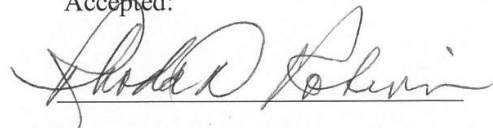
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I would like to express my gratitude to my dear family for your constant support on helping me through completing my Master's Degree in Special Education. It wasn't an easy journey, and it took much work and dedication. Thank you deeply, Mom, Dad, Mike, Chrissy, Chris, Cade, Mackenzie, Derek, my little Vinnie, and a special cousin Barbara.

To my dear little Vinnie, I hope that someday you are able to pursue your dreams as I have done. It takes great dedication and perseverance, but the hard work will be so very gratifying. The best advice I could give is if I finished a 3 year thesis paper, you can do it too! Never, ever, ever give up!

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my dear grandmother. She taught me that if you set goals in life, they are capable of achieving. A quote from my grandmother's story of her life, "I was taught as a child, that family was of utmost importance in life. I tried to make that a priority. The privilege of teaching, my primary goal, made me happy and content. I touched many people's lives and hope I did make a difference in theirs." I know this quote is true because my grandmother inspired me to become a teacher. I hope I too can follow in her footsteps. Thank you Grandma Bong for being such an inspirational woman in my life.

WHAT CAUSES SPECIAL EDUCATORS TO BECOME BURNED OUT?

ABSTRACT

This research study was designed to determine that causes that lead burn out amongst special education teachers. The study was a study that was compared to a study done in 1987. The researcher administered a survey to 27 participants in an elementary school, middle school, and high school. The study looked at four reasons that may cause burn out amongst special education teachers.

1. How many years of teaching experience do you have as a Special Education teacher?
2. How many years teaching experience do you have in working with students with learning disabilities, emotional and or behavioral disabilities, or cognitive disabilities?
3. What other degrees or certification do you currently hold?
4. Why did you choose to enter the special education field as a teacher?

The findings in the 2012 study compared to the 1987 study showed that based on the results of the study and surveys, I have found the problem of burn out among special educators still occurs much too often. Many of the same factors still cause burn out as my survey answers still showed to be very similar. There is still too much paperwork overload involved in the job, too many students on one caseload for special education teachers, and there is lack of time for special education teachers to complete their job duties. There are positive results that did show true about special educators feeling more support amongst colleges. This is due to weekly meetings, team teaching or co-teaching, professional development, and all around more collaboration.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“The Job That Ate My Brain!” “See the work pile up!”, “Hear your co-workers snarl like irritated wolverines!,” “Feel the sweat trickling down your back!,” “Smell your boss sneaking up behind you!” These quotes were written on a card that I came across from the 1980’s. Is this truly how some special educators feel on a daily basis when working in the field of special education? Throughout my research and surveys, it is my hope that the facts and opinions of this research will help us understand what attributes to the burn-out among special educators.

The Special Educators were chosen to participate in my survey. Special educators were picked as subjects because they deal with the stresses daily which may cause them to burn-out. I hoped to get real answers to the question: what leads special educators to burn-out? I wanted to know what types of stressors affect each individual participant in my survey. I picked teachers within the state of Wisconsin in my school district because this same group of people was picked in a similar survey conducted in Wisconsin and Minnesota in 1987; it was also a convenience sample. I wanted to see how my data collection compared to the new millennium. A lot has changed over the past three decades, but have the answers changed to the same survey questions? I conducted a survey and collected data from my survey. The surveys were sent out by inner-school mail. I gave the people that participated in the survey complete directions for the survey and an envelope in which them to return when their survey was completed. When I received completed surveys back in the mail, I then organized and recorded the data.

During my research I used a comparative study. I looked at the similarities with the two groups that have been studied throughout my research. I compared a survey which was conducted among special educators in 1987 and a survey that I conducted in 2012. I compared the statistics of the answers by graphs. I used qualitative studies when I analyzed my data from the 2012 survey conducted, and the quantitative approach when comparing my two surveys.

Looking at a variety of studies, I have found that many studies have used the survey process when collecting data. I used surveys to collect data as well. I compared a study conducted in 1987 and compared the data to the same survey which I conducted. I wanted to see how the data had changed over the past three decades and how the answers have stayed the same.

Other studies in the past have shown that burn-out is a real problem that needs real solutions. The results from the 1987 survey show that the top two reasons for burn-out amongst special education teachers was wishing to get back into the regular mainstream classroom, and burn-out due to many different factors. The third reason indicated in the 1987 study was due to lack of administrative support.

The survey I used contained the same survey questions from that which was conducted in 1987. While conducting a survey, behaviors are characteristics of individuals and how they react to or in specified circumstances. Dynamics and other personal or professional conduct being studied may be self-reported in surveys. Opinions and attitudes are psychological variables that represent participants' beliefs, which may be inter-related with facts to determine significant characteristics of selected groups of participants (Burke, 2009). It is my hope that the participants in my survey took their time on the survey and most importantly, were honest.

I collected data from all the surveys and calculated percentages based on how the questions were answered. I also compared the answers to the survey that was conducted in 1987 to my survey. I used a table to compare the differences in the answers between the two surveys. I used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods after I analyzed my data.

I picked this type of analysis because it is clear to the reader and concise. Surveys give readers the attitudes of the subjects who participated in the survey. The reader will also get a sense of the subjects' beliefs, opinions, and preferences. Using the graph of comparing the two surveys will give the reader a clear picture of how opinions may have changed over the past three decades.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the principle causes of special education burn-out. In the sample of special education teachers K-12 in my district, reasons for burn-out in this study are described as too much paperwork, too many students on one special education teacher's caseload, and lack of time to complete special education teacher duties.

In doing my research, it is my hope that the reader will come to a clear understanding to what causes burn-out among special educators. By looking at my percentages, graphs, and answers to the two surveys conducted, I hope the reader finds it easy to compare and understand the statistics collected.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Burn-out: To become apathetic or depressed, and cease to function effectively, due to the fatigue and frustration of prolonged stress and overwork; of people. (<http://www.answers.com>)

Special Education Teacher: Classroom or private instruction involving techniques, exercises, and subject matter designed for students whose learning needs cannot be met by a standard school curriculum. (<http://www.answers.com>)

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teacher burn-out in special education has been occurring for the past 30 years and possibly longer according to a study done in 1987, involving 812 teachers from 4 public schools. The surveys were to provide data that tracked teacher transfers across schools, school districts, state boundaries, public and private sectors, teaching specializations, and out of the teaching profession. They were also given a follow-up survey as a longitudinal component that was conducted the following year. The results indicated that the attrition rate of 20% for special education teachers was higher than for general education teachers. It stated that, of the teachers who left education, 12% taught special education versus 7% who taught general education. It also stated that 8% of special education teachers left public school teaching all together versus 6% of general education teachers. With the data and information on turnover and burn-out in special education, one may well inquire as to the reasons for the higher attrition rates among special educators (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, and Miller 2007) The article described that this issue of burn-out among special education teachers is again brought up in study that was conducted in the year 1997. A study was done using 93 Florida teachers that did not return to their special education positions after the 1993 school year. This group of special education teachers was interviewed over the telephone. They were asked questions about special education teacher attrition and the causes for leaving special education. The overall results of this study showed that the number one reason this group of special education teachers left the field of special education was to take other positions in other areas of education. Many of these teachers took general education teacher positions (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, and Miller, 2007).

While researching an article out of a 2001 issue of “Journal of Learning Disabilities”, I came across an interesting reason that burn-out may occur for some special education teachers. It was stated that those who have studied teacher burn-out have identified a number of reasons for it, ranging from decreased respect from pupils and parents to salaries which are much lower than those in other jobs demanding an equal level of education. This is the part that caught my attention:, “Usually up around the top of the reasons given for teachers either quitting their jobs or staying on the job but doing as little as possible, is the isolation in which teachers must work” (Chandler 2001). The article continues by discussing how some special educators feel like they are all alone in their field because they work with a different population of students and their job demands are much different than the general education classroom. The article is titled, “The Loneliness of the Special Education Teacher.”

The focus of my research project is comparing a study in which Cynthia Miller, a special education teacher, conducted in 1987 with my study conducted in 2012. Throughout Miller’s research, she surveyed many special education teachers throughout Midwest Minnesota schools. After conducting her surveys, she found the top reasons for the greatest reward in a special education teacher’s work was seeing the students learn and succeed. She then reported that the top problems among special education teachers were wishing to get back into the regular mainstream classroom, lack of administrative support, and the pile up on paperwork (Miller, 1987).

CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to find out the main reasons for burn-out among special education teachers.

The method I used during my research was a survey approach. During my research I used a comparative study. I looked at the similarities with the two groups that have been studied throughout my research. I compared a survey which was conducted in 1987 and a survey that I conducted in 2012 among special educators. I compared the statistics of the answers by graphs. I used qualitative studies when I analyzed my data from the 2012 survey conducted, and the quantitative approach when comparing my two surveys.

The population that was picked in my survey was all special education teachers which included kindergarten through 12th grade in an upper Midwest Wisconsin school district. The sample was a convenient sample because it was given to people that work in my school district. All the surveys were sent back to me through inner-school mail which eliminated any hassle with postage or mailing difficulties.

The purpose of my study was to find out the main causes of special education teacher burn-out. I used a survey which was conducted by Cynthia Miller in 1987 and compared it to a survey which I conducted in 2012. The purpose of these two independent variables is to compare any similarities or differences among the survey responses.

I used the survey technique for my data collection. The survey approach I used was the same survey that was conducted in 1987. While conducting a survey, behaviors are

characteristics of individuals and how they react to or in specified circumstances. Dynamics and other personal or professional conduct being studied may be self-reported in surveys. Opinions and attitudes are psychological variables that represent participants' beliefs, which may be inter-related with facts to determine significant characteristics of selected groups of participants (Burke, 2009). It is my hope that the participants in my survey took their time on the survey and most importantly were honest.

I collected data from all the surveys, and found out percentages of how the questions were answered. I also compared the answers to the survey that was conducted in 1987 to my survey which I conducted in 2012. I used a table to graph the differences in the answers between the two surveys. I used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods after I analyzed my data.

I have picked this type of analysis because it's clear to the reader and to the point. Surveys give readers the attitudes of the subjects who participated in the survey. The reader will also get a sense of the subject's beliefs, opinions, and preferences. Using the graph of comparing the two surveys will give the reader a clear picture of how opinions have changed over the past two decades.

During this research, the population sample was a small population of special education teachers throughout the Upper Midwest Region in the state of Wisconsin and Minnesota. This study will not be generalizable to all areas of special education teachers.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF STUDY

Throughout my research, my goal was to find answers to what the main causes that lead to burn-out of special educators. Is there a way to prevent such a high rate of burn-out among special educators?

To answer these questions, a survey was conducted among special educators in one Wisconsin Public School district. The data I collected from the survey is described in this chapter.

I developed a one page survey,(see Appendix). I distributed the survey to teachers of students with learning disabilities, emotional behavior disabilities, cognitive disabilities, autism, and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing. I sent out a total of 40 surveys to the special education teachers within my school district. Twenty-one surveys were returned back to me, the return rate 52%.

Of the 83 surveys that were given in 1987, it was reported that 23 participants were male for 28%, and 50 were female for 61%. Of the 21 surveys that were given in 2012 it was reported, 7 were male for 33%, and 14 were female for 67%.

The 1987 study showed age groups as follows compared to the 2012 study:

1987 Study			2012 Study		
Age	Responses	Percent	Age	Responses	Percent
20-29	7	7%	20-29	1	5%
30-39	32	40%	30-39	6	29%
40-49	26	32%	40-49	7	33%
50-59	14	18%	50-59	4	19%
60-69	2	3%	60-69	3	14%

The first question on the survey was: How many years of teaching experience do you have as a special education teacher in the area of learning disability?” The 1987 study showed age groups as follows, compared to the 2012 study:

1987 Study		2012 Study	
Years	Responses	Years	Responses
First Year	2	First Year	0
2 years	2	2 years	0
3 years	1	3 years	0
4 years	0	4 years	0
5 years	0	5years	2
6 years	1	6 years	1
7 years	3	7 years	0
8 years	0	8 years	2
9 years	3	9 years	0
10 years	0	10 years	1
11 years	5	11 years	0
12 years	2	12 years	0

13 years	5	13 years	0
14 years	0	14 years	0
15 years	2	15 years	1
16 years	3	16 years	0
17 years	2	17 years	0
18 years	2	18 years	1
19 years	0	19 years	0
20 years	0	20 years	1
21 years	0	21 years	0
22 years	0	22 years	1
23 years	0	23 years	0
24 years	0	24 years	0
25 years	0	25 years	1

The second question to the survey was: “How many years of teaching experience do you have as a special education teacher in the area of emotional behavioral disability?” The 1987 study showed age groups as followed compared to the 2012 study:

1987 Study

2012 Study

Years	Responses	Years	Responses
First Year	10	First Year	1
2 years	4	2 years	0
3 years	4	3 years	0
4 years	4	4 years	1
5 years	1	5 years	0
6 years	3	6 years	0
7 years	2	7 years	0
8 years	1	8 years	0
9 years	3	9 years	0
10 years	1	10 years	0
11 years	1	11 years	0
12 years	2	12 years	1
13 years	0	13 years	0
14 years	2	14 years	0
15 years	0	15 years	0
16 years	1	16 years	0
17 years	0	17 years	0
18 years	0	18 years	0
19 years	0	19 years	0
20 years	1	20 years	1

21 years	0	21 years	0
22 years	0	22 years	1

The third question to the survey was: “How many years of teaching experience do you have as a special education teacher in the area of cognitive disability?” The 1987 study showed age groups as followed compared to the 2012 study:

1987 Study

2012 Study

Years	Responses	Years	Responses
First Year	10	First Year	1
2 years	4	2 years	0
3 years	4	3 years	0
4 years	4	4 years	1
5 years	1	5 years	0
6 years	3	6 years	0
7 years	2	7 years	0
8 years	1	8 years	0
9 years	3	9 years	0
10 years	1	10 years	0
11 years	1	11 years	0
12 years	2	12 years	1
13 years	0	13 years	0
14 years	2	14 years	0
15 years	0	15 years	0
16 years	1	16 years	0
17 years	0	17 years	0
18 years	0	18 years	0
19 years	0	19 years	0
20 years	1	20 years	1
21 years	0	21 years	0
22 years	0	22 years	1

The next section does not compare the 1987 study to the 2012 study. These next tables show special education teachers that are certified in other areas in special education and their years of experience.

This section shows how many years teachers in the 2012 study have been teaching students with cognitive disabilities.

2012 Study

Years	Responses
6	1
10	1
19	1

This section shows how many years teachers in the 2012 study have been teaching students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

2012 Study

Years	Responses
17	1

This section shows how many years teachers in the 2012 study have been teaching students with a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Disability.

2012 Study

Years	Responses
16	1

This section shows how many years teachers in the 2012 study have been teaching students with a Speech and Language Disability.

2012 Study

Years	Responses
12	1

This next section is also not a comparison to the 1987 study. It is feedback of response from the 2012 survey question number 3. The question was: “What other degrees or certification do you currently hold besides a Master’s Degree in Special Education?”

2012 study

Degree	Responses
Master's Degree in Communication	1
Master's Degree in Deaf Education	1
Master's Degree in Reading	1
Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education	5
Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Social Studies	1
Middle School Certification	2
Pupil Services and Principal	1
Bachelor's Degree in Business	1
History and Indian Education Minor	1
Library Certification	1
Bachelor's Degree in Health Education	1
Coaching Certification	1
English Major	1
Math Certification	1

The next section is a comparison between the 1987 study and the 2012 study. The question was: "Why did you choose to enter the special education field as a teacher?"

	1987 Study	2012 Study
A. Job availability was great.	31 %	33%
B. Could not find a job in other certified area and took this as a second option.	21%	5%
C. Desired an interest in this specific area.	44%	48%
A. Other	4 %	14%

The results of the 1987 survey showed 31% answering that the job availability was great, 21% answered that they could not find a job in another certified area and took this as a second

option, the largest number, 44%, came back with the answer that they had a desire and interest to teach in this field, and 4% gave other answers. They were: “offered job if went back to school for certification”, “alcoholic home and wanted to help others in needy environments,” and “job offered to them by supervisor”. These results showed the majority of the special educators in the 1987 study entered their field out of choice, and that the market was open for them to enter this field.

The results of the 2012 survey show that 33% answering said the job availability was great, 5% answered that they could not find a job in another certified area and took this as a second option, the largest number, 48%, came back with the answer that they had a desire and interest to teach in this field, and 3% gave other answers. They were: “encouragement of a friend”, “gain knowledge on how to help students with diverse special education needs”, and “I volunteered in special education and worked for a number of years as a paraprofessional and an assistant. I wanted a career in this field.” Again, these responses are very similar to the responses from the 1987 study.

The final question on the survey was: What problem areas do you have at your present job?

The 1987 study’s top three answers were: paperwork 21%, not enough time with students 10%, and administrative problems 9%. The following was a complete breakdown of the responses. Ninety-one responses were received from the 1987 study.

1987 Study

Problems working with other staff members	8%
Schedule problems	6%
Too large a caseload	6%
Stress	4%

Problems with parents	4%
Lack of proper training and guidance	3%
Lack of motivation and poor attitude from the students	3%
Discipline	2%
Finding realistic expectations from students	2%
Poor budget	2%
Mainstreaming problems	2%
Other outside duties interfere	1%
Social service problems	1%
Changing self-image of students with Emotional Behavioral Disabilities	1%
Going between 2 schools	1%
Diagnosing	1%
Too many grade level, and subjects to teach	1%

The top three problem areas were: paperwork demands 38%, large caseloads 33%, and lack of time to complete job duties 33%. Some teachers gave more than one reason as to what causes them problems in their job.

2012 Study

Paperwork demands	38%
Large caseloads	33%
Lack of time to complete job duties	33%
Numerous meetings (such as IEP meetings, professional development, etc.)	14%
Working with families and lack of parent involvement	19%
Working with students who are defiant	10%
Working with a range of disabilities	10%
Difficulty with paraprofessionals	10%
Lack of student motivation	10%
A special education teacher has various roles	10%
Poor collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers	10%
Discipline	10%
Accountability for students academically and behaviorally	10%
Not enough consistency with staff	5%
Not enough time to teach the necessary skills (small amount of time with huge goals.)	5%
Cross Categorical Special Education teachers are responsible for knowing many things.	5%
We need to understand the change in laws and our roles and	5%

responsibilities as special education teachers	
Have a life outside of work	5%
Availability of quality of materials to teach with, and ease of obtaining such resources	5%
Need more opportunities to go to trainings	5%
District only hires 4-4 ½ hour positions, and most of my students need one-on-one help in order to learn	5%
Over diagnosis of Autism sometimes places students in the program who, in reality, have an emotional behavior disability	5%
Students learned helplessness in part because of teachers' and or parents/ unintentional enabling	5%
Political environment for state workers	5%
Funding cut backs	5%

After comparing the final question regarding problem areas in your present job, the top answer was the same. The biggest problem area was the abundance of paperwork that goes along with being a special education teacher. One more similarity was the high number of students on a caseload. Both the 1987 study and the 2012 study responses to caseload was their caseload numbers were too high, and the students' educational and behavioral needs were not being met.

After comparing the surveys and researching the main causes of special education burn-out, it is proof that the abundance of paperwork has been an ongoing issue among special educators over the past three decades. Another cause of burn-out among special educators could also be attributed to the large amount of students on special education teacher's case loads.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECCOMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study and surveys, I have found the problem of burn-out among special educators still occurs much too often. Many of the same factors still cause burn-out as my survey answers showed many similarities. There is still too much paperwork overload involved in the job, too many students on one caseload for special education teachers, and there is lack of time for special education teachers to complete their job duties. There are positive results that did show true about special educators feeling more support amongst colleagues. This is due to weekly meetings, team teaching or co-teaching, professional development, and, all around, more collaboration.

DISCUSSION SAMPLE OF DATA

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY FOR THE FIELD OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

The findings of this research and survey conducted show that many special educators still have the same stressors that they did in the 1980's. After conducting my survey, I wish I would have conducted one-on-one interviews with a variety of special educators. I felt as though I would have gotten in-depth answers and better feelings from the educators on a more personal level during the interview.

SUMMARY

It is my hope that people will read my research project and take a positive piece of information to help them be a successful special educator. I hope the results of my survey will

be read and not disregarded because there is special education burn-out occurring currently, and will probably continue to occur if some changes are not made to help special education teachers handle the stresses that come with the job.

The following are some suggestions taken from the readings and other teachers surveyed in doing this research project. Hopefully, some suggestions will be practiced by special education teachers, administrators, and college programs that teach special educators.

Suggestions for Special Educators:

1. Special education teachers new to the profession should seek training on time management techniques, which focus on their professional goals and personal values. Such training may enable them to set realistic and systematic priorities for professional growth (Partin & Gargiulo, 1980).
2. Experienced special education teachers should seek new challenges by: periodically requesting changes in teaching assignments, pursuing graduate work or another course of study, attending professional meetings, and assuming active leadership roles on working committees within their school systems (Miller, 1987).

Suggestions for the administrators:

1. Special education teachers with less than three years of experience should be provided with a mentor, and older, experienced teacher, who meets regularly with the young teacher to provide direction for effective time management and attainment of professional goal (Miller, 1987).

2. Supervision and consultation services for the inexperienced teacher should occur regularly and frequently. The supervisor should not give advice, but be willing to “roll up his/her sleeves and work” (Miller, 1987).

Suggestion for the college programs of special education teacher:

1. Include instructional components in preservice programs which address the need for stress reduction during professional years. These might include time management skills, communication skills, and an examination for implications of child advocacy roles within a curriculum (Miller, 1987).
2. Studying teachers should have the opportunities to talk with others experienced in the field and receive information first hand, about dealing with stress on the job (Miller, 1987).

Special education is a field that takes great compassion. It is essential that special education teachers have the skills to balance all their duties that come along with the job title. It is my desire that special education teachers are able to do their job successfully with the hope that they will not become so immensely stressed that it causes them to burn-out.

APPENDIX

SAMPLE OF SURVEY

Please fill in the appropriate answer where indicated. Be brief on the open ended questions.

1. Please check the box for your current type of special education program you are teaching this school year.

Learning Disabilities____

Cognitive Disabilities____

Emotional Disabilities____

Cross Categorical____

2. Sex Male____ Female____

3. Age 20-29____ 50-59____
 30-39____ 60-69____
 40-49____ 70+ ____

5. How many years of teaching experience do you have as a Special Education teacher?
6. How many years teaching experience do you have in working with students with learning disabilities, emotional and or behavioral disabilities, or cognitive disabilities?
7. What other degrees or certification do you currently hold?
8. Why did you choose to enter the special education field as a teacher?

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